

Land of the Gods
By
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One

Marcus slept deeply in his wooden bunk. In the bunk above him lay Rodrigo. All was quiet in the compound of Versailles. The three nights of feasting were at an end and tomorrow was Blood night. The Virgins of Versailles had washed down the revelers and some prayed while others began to shake uncontrollably, staring nowhere intently. Many began to lose control and cried out and were taken away. As ever, there were those who reveled in the Blood celebrations. They would sing and dance uncontrollably wearing flowers in their hair, red paint on their hands and faces. They were looking forward to Blood night. Marcus had worked in the compound for almost two years and had seen it all before. The air was scented with flowers but it hid an underlying smell. The smell was that of death and decay. The blood was old. It was caked and crusted into everything. The ground was full of it.

"Man, what's your name?" asked the little boy in Marcus' dream.

Marcus was dressed in the attire of a Praetorian. He had the emblem of Kerebros emblazoned onto his metal crest. People had feared and admired him then. The young virgins gave him furtive glances and whispered among themselves wondering when he would become a Citizen. On his arm were the three marks of the great houses. One more and he would become a Citizen.

"I am Praetorian," Marcus had responded regally. "Be on your way Pleb."

The boy in the oversized coat ignored the comment.

"Praetorian? That's not a name. Even my dog has a name. He's called Hunter."

The small boy with the eyes sunken from hunger called his dog over with a whistle.

Hunter was an Alsatian and friendly too. He looked up at Marcus, his mouth open and smiling.

"What's your real name?" asked the boy.

"I'll tell you on one condition," Marcus said.

"What?"

"That you go about your business."

"I'll go on one condition too," said the boy smartly.

"What?" Marcus tried to hide his smile.

"That I tell you my name too."

"Deal," said Marcus. "My name is Marcus of the Helvii."

"I am Sam of Venice. Welcome to my home." He spoke in a slightly theatrical way, pointing out the streets surrounding them.

"Welcome Sam of Venice. Now be on your way. I have work to do." Marcus reached into his pocket and fetched out a coin and gave it to the homeless boy. The sun was almost down.

"Go! Now." The Citizens would be here soon.

The scene changed suddenly in Marcus' dream. He was naked and lying near Rivana in his officer's room. She was walking in reverse away from him. His body was lined with thin blood lines where her sharp finger nails had stroked him and her tongue

had caressed the bloody markings. He watched as she pulled away from him. “How could you?” she asked. She was crying blood tears. The blood tears rolled from her cheek up into her eyes which momentarily flashed red and then white again. “Never again,” she said and she was gone, disappearing into the darkness.

Marcus sat up in his small wooden bunk, his heart beating hard in his chest. His body was covered in sweat. The knot in his stomach continued. His blood felt like it was crawling beneath his skin, trying to find a way out. The three marks on his arm were aching again. The Gods were close. He could feel them. Even his blood could feel them. Darkness was falling. It would soon be time to go to work again.

Marcus arose early and walked down to the communal showers. He stripped and let the warm water run over his skin. He pushed back the dark hair from his face and checked his markings. They were bleeding a little. They had never healed really. He walked into the bathroom and finished up. There were no mirrors permitted but for private use. He took the one he had. It was small and circular and he looked at his tired features. Outside in the courtyard the marching band were assembling and getting ready for the march into the feasting area. The revelers would soon be on the last stage of their way and become Blood, taking the journey down the river Styx to Hades where Kerberos waited to greet them at the gates.

Marcus turned around to see Lucius behind him. He’d come into the showers quietly. He looked at Marcus’ naked body.

“Where’s Rodrigo?” he asked.

“On his way,” said Marcus.

“The wise man and the fool. The two of you are quite a pair,” laughed Lucius. He had two marks on his arms. Rumor had it that he was in line for a third Mark but it had not happened yet. He stripped off in front of Marcus and began to shower.

“You know Praetorian. I could make it much easier for you here. All you have to do is ask.”

Lucius looked at Marcus as he soaped himself down, smiling in an over-bearing way. It was as much a sneer as a smile.

Marcus said nothing and walked back to his small room with the double bunk, having nothing but disdain for Lucius.

Rodrigo was still sleeping. “Rodrigo, come on get up,” said Marcus.

Theoretically, Rodrigo was in charge of Marcus but in reality it was the other way around.

“Don’t want to,” grumbled Rodrigo.

“It’s Blood night. Lots to do.”

“Again? So soon? Tooo soooooon...” he yawned.

“Up,” insisted Marcus. Rodrigo sat up and stretched, listening to the band warm up, kicking his legs to the rhythm of the music. He stretched out his arms and gave a yawn so wide Marcus could almost see all his teeth. He put his feet on the ground and complained how cold the floor was and then wandered around in a seemingly endless pattern, trying to find his clothes.

“Did you see my shoes?” asked Rodrigo in the tiny room.

“Here,” said Marcus. They were where they always were.

“Can’t find my clothes.” Rodrigo mumbled.

Marcus handed the clothes to Rodrigo one by one. The secret to this routine was not to give Rodrigo the clothes and tell him to put them on. That made him agitated. He also hated to walk on cracks in the ground and was always counting in his head. Occasionally, he'd let out a number.

"Seventeen," he said one time. Rodrigo had counted the number of windows in the houses since he'd seen a pigeon on a street post.

They assembled in the court yard. The sun was almost down. Lucius and his men were there, dressed in the attire of Versailles Blood Guard. Marcus and Rodrigo stood behind them in plain clothes and lifted the hoods over their heads. It hid their faces. For the most part, they were supposed to be faceless.

"It's cold," grumbled Rodrigo. "Do you believe in ghosts Marcus because I think..."

"Quiet." Marcus touched Rodrigo on the arm.

The Virgins of Versailles assembled. There were some new ones indicated by their lime green dresses. They carried flower petals in their baskets. One of the new Virgins turned around uncharacteristically and glanced back fleetingly at them. Marcus' face was hidden by the cowl but he felt a sudden moment of revelation.

I know her!

Anthusa.

Her glance was gone and she became part of the entourage. The band led the way and went into the feasting hall where the revelers were waiting. They were subdued. They knew their time had come. This was the moment where it usually went wrong or they played to the script. Occasionally, one or more would try to bolt and this was where Lucius and his men would be required. The trick was to maintain the illusion of normality. The group of fifty or more revelers was encouraged to join in behind the band and they were strewn with petals by the Virgins who chanted soothingly. All of the revelers worldly belongings were left behind. They were dressed in simple garments. The compound of Versailles had high walls that could not be climbed and gates that were locked. There was no escape.

Rodrigo walked alongside Marcus and began to hum to the music.

"Quiet," whispered Marcus.

They approached the gates of Kerberos and waited. Lucius walked forward and took his staff and knocked three times on the emblem of Kerebros. "Travelers for the Gods," he announced. The giant doors opened and inside lay a tunnel which descended underground, lit by lines of smoking torches. On either side of the tunnel were statues of the Founders from the three houses, standing regally and their families. They descended. The doors closed behind them. Some of the revelers looked back, beginning to look a little nervous, in some cases holding hands. The music echoed strangely in the tunnel. One of the women revelers began to panic. She pulled away from the group and went over to the blood guard. They blocked her escape.

"I think there's been a mistake. It's not my time. There's been a mistake!"

Lucius stepped forward immediately.

"I understand. I'll look into it for you. It's very common." Lucius' voice was calming and reassuring. "My office is down here. Walk with me." The woman relaxed

and Lucius looked at his men, giving them a small smile, knowing what was coming next.

They arrived at another set of doors at the end of the tunnel. It was inlaid with the image of the river Styx in silver and a ferryman made of tarnished bronze. To the left were a set of other doors, leading into smaller rooms. There was a giant lever to the right of the doors, pointing upwards. Its other setting was marked with a carving of Kerberos the three headed dog.

The doors opened into a giant dome shaped chamber. The surface of the dome was pitted with Crawl Holes for the Citizens to enter and exit all around its structure, circled with red paint. The top of the dome was painted with images of Hades where the Gods sat amongst the clouds and beneath them lay semi-naked Blood flying through the air like birds up towards them. The Blood looked ecstatic and the Gods sat happily in their golden robes on the clouds beckoning the blood up to them with outstretched hands. At the center of the room were simple wooden chairs and tables. On the tables lay silver plates and gold goblets. There was no food. The revelers sat down and the band marched around them and then slowly out of the chamber. Marcus and Rodrigo waited by the doors.

Marcus watched as Anthusa walked by. Her eyes glanced briefly his way and then she was gone.

“What’s taking so long,” moaned Rodrigo. “They’re gonna run and then we’re going to have to round them up. I hate it when that happens.”

Marcus sighed. “Not long now. It’ll be fine.”

However, Marcus heard a cry from the small room where Lucius had brought the woman. His men had set upon her in the room, taking their time to have her one at a time.

Marcus couldn’t bear it any more. He walked over to the room and pushed the guard on the door out of the way.

“Leave her alone,” demanded Marcus.

“Or you’ll do what Praetorian?” sneered Lucius.

“They’re going to bolt any minute now and Gaius is going to want to know why.” There was a veiled threat in Marcus’ words. Lucius’ men gathered around Marcus.

“Maybe you were someone important once Marcus but you’re not any longer. Down here, I’m in charge.” Lucius nodded to his men and they released the sobbing woman. “If you’re not careful, you’ll end up in here.”

Lucius took the woman by the arm and led her out into the chamber. There was little or no fight in her now. Lucius walked back out of the chamber and gave the signal. The doors closed with a thud. Lucius brought the lever down.

Rodrigo sat down against the wall and put his hands over his ears.

He began to hum a lullaby to himself.

Lucius brushed shoulders with Marcus and left, heading back up the tunnel after his men.

The torches began to burn down, throwing odd shadows onto the images of the Gods.

Marcus and Rodrigo waited.

The screaming began and Marcus closed his eyes.

The torches were almost out when the handle lifted, clicking back into place. The lock on the door was released. From initial screaming an eerie silence had descended. Rodrigo and Marcus walked into the cavern holding torches ahead of them. They relit the ones that had been put out by the Citizens. The Citizens liked to put them out on the Blood which seemed to increase the screaming and shouting and the sport for them. The smell was almost impossible to get used to. The Blood, so stricken with fear, often lost control of their bowels or vomited with fear. There was also the smell of blood itself, smeared on the walls and ground. There were pools of blood where some seemed to have been dragged around or thrown and had their bones broken or shattered. Once the lighting was restored, Marcus and Rodrigo retied cloths around their faces. The table where the Blood had initially gathered was still a gathering place for them, except for one fact. They had been the food this night for the Citizens.

"Flyer," said Rodrigo, pointing up at one of the entry and exit points for the Citizens. There was a body there, jammed half in and half out, blood dripping down the corpses left leg.

"My turn," said Marcus. "I'll bring him down later."

Slowly, they moved over to the bodies.

Heads ripped from shoulders and hearts torn from chests lay on the silver plates. The gold goblets, many knocked over had been filled with blood and were mostly empty now. They took the heads first and put them in the Head Sack and they put the hearts in the Heart Sack. The hearts were still warm and sticky and seemed to be a delicacy for the Citizens. Occasionally, they would find a liver but the heart was the favorite. Naked bodies were laid along the table. The Blood were marked by the Citizens in the neck and inner thigh. The wrist was also a favorite place. The Citizens had dined well here. Both Marcus and Rodrigo lifted the bodies off the table and carried them out, storing them in wretched smelling body bags.

Marcus got the ladder for the Flyer and climbed three times the height of a man. He tugged on the leg of the Blood, trying to pull it out of the crawl hole used by the Citizens. The body would not move. It was jammed in tight, almost like the Citizen had wanted to bring it home for afters. Marcus shook his head.

"Hades," he muttered under his breath. He would have to reach into the crawl hole even though it was forbidden. Here no Pleb was permitted. Marcus got his hand on the shoulder and pried the body free. He felt something brush against his hand and Marcus realized that one of the Citizens was still in the crawl hole, probably one just made and still caught with the Hunger. He immediately pulled away as the sharp fingernails touched his hand and his ladder swung backwards towards the ground. Marcus jumped from the ladder, landed feet first but then fell onto his back. Rodrigo came over quickly.

"Better to use rope around the legs for this one. There's a Citizen still in there. Probably a newcomer," said Marcus catching his breath. Rodrigo nodded and they took the Blood down this way, keeping away from the Crawl Hole. By the time they had done this, the Citizen was gone. Marcus often wondered how many, if any, of the Citizens hung back in the darkness watching as they did their work but he tried not to think such thoughts and got on with his work. Once the lever was raised, the Blood feasting was officially over. The red markings around the crawl holes marked the border between life

and death for a Pleb. Inside the crawl hold lay the dominion of the Citizens and pathways back to the Coombes.

Marcus found hairs in the hand of the Blood who he had pulled down. It appeared there had been some kind of a struggle. The Citizen had clearly been a novice Blood hunter.

Marcus looked around him to see no one was looking and slipped the hair into his pocket then carried on his work.

Finally, once all the bodies were removed, Marcus and Rodrigo brought in buckets of water and washed down the tables and removed the blood stains from the floor. Channels at the edge of the room ran into underground drains and the worst was over. Soon, the Virgins of Versailles would come down and rearrange everything, cleaning the tables, plates and the goblets for the next Blood night. More rose petals would be strewn across the floor and the cycle would begin again next week.

By the time Marcus and Rodrigo were finished carrying the bodies onto their cart the night was almost over. Thin slivers of light were threatening to break through the night. Everyone was going back to bed but Marcus and Rodrigo had a full days' work ahead of them. To Marcus' surprise Anthusa came over to him, having been waiting in the shadows. He knew he looked wretched and smelt of death but Anthusa did not mind. She seemed impatient to see him. She walked over to him and lifted her veil.

"Anthusa. You shouldn't be here. It's dangerous."

"I don't care. I just want to tell you that we all still love you Marcus. Don't give up." She seemed tired and emotional. "You did nothing wrong. Everyone talks about you, even now."

"Please go." The Virgins were only permitted to interact with the Citizens. Talking to Marcus meant she could be punished severely, maybe even sacrificed.

"Your mother is ill. She asks for you." One of the Blood guard walked out of his quarters and Anthusa fled back into the darkness before he could see her. She was gone in an instant. Marcus and Rodrigo climbed onto the cart.

"What's taking so long? Get a move on!" shouted Lucius. His voice was slurring a little. He'd been drinking. He walked over to the cart and slapped the horses.

The horse jumped a little but Marcus settled the mare down and she broke into a trot. They went past the home of Nobleman Gaius Flavius and reached the gates. The Blood guard let them out and they were outside the Versailles compound and into the Venice quarter. They slipped into the side lane of the busy road and trotted. Citizens driving Sports cars with blackened out windows sped past the horse and cart. They were in a hurry home to the Coombes. Marcus took a left and went down the back lanes used exclusively by the Plebs. Here no Citizens drove. Marcus traveled parallel to the main street fronts of the exclusive Venice quarter lined with beautiful shops, selling high fashion and much sought after jewellery. The buildings of the Plebs were drab and poor. Washing hung from the windows of the buildings in the narrow streets.

All Marcus could think about was his ill mother. What was he to do? There was only one option. When the work was done, he would talk to Gaius. The sun began to rise. It was the beginning of a new day. The streets of Mora were quiet. The Citizens and the Plebs were sleeping. On a quiet street amongst the sprawling suburbs, Marcus and Rodrigo ferried the dead.

“Nineteen,” said Rodrigo as they went on their way.

“I saw a ghost last night,” he announced excitedly. “Do you believe in ghosts Marcus?”

Marcus looked at Rodrigo. “I don’t know what I believe in any more.”

The horse began to trot faster and left the Venice quarter.

Daylight.

They took the service road at the back of Mars Arena where the gladiators fought. The giant overhead lights which were normally on were now off and the car park was empty. The noise of the excited crowd was gone, replaced by empty echoes of the horse’s clip clapping. Soon they reached the outer walls of the city of Mora and passed under the giant archway which was shaped like the mouth of the Gods. The two great teeth made out of marble punctured the pathway on either side. Above it were the words Quo Vadis. Cameras recorded the Blood who came and went. Observation posts were marked with blackened out glass windows where Citizens watched darkly.

Quo Vadis?

Where am I going indeed, thought Marcus darkly.

They moved into AnaMora beyond the high concrete walls. The fields and crops could be seen as far as the eye could seem leading to the Valley of the Souls and the snow topped mountains beyond. Few Citizens lived here. There were animals and crops tended to by a few Blood as far as the eye could see. They turned off the beaten track and headed for the forest due South.

Soon they were in shade under the tall evergreen trees. The road narrowed and began to wind inexorably downward. The tree line thinned and they were on the road down to the Blood Quarry. Rodrigo was sleeping while sitting up, his lower jaw bobbing up and down. He had perfected this sleeping technique over many years of ferrying the Blood to their final resting place. The rough sawn wood was gathered in piles on the dusty ground, near the small shack where all the tools were kept. In places, the wheels circled through muddy puddles of Blood ash. They had been burning the Blood here for over two centuries. There were many sites like this dotted all around the city. Today, there would be several fires burning from the different parts of AnaMora. As the number of Citizens grew so too did the Blood Pyres. The horse stopped almost without having to be reigned in. It knew the routine as well as Marcus and Rodrigo. It stopped and dropped its head.

Marcus woke Rodrigo. He opened his eyes.

“What?” asked Rodrigo.

“Unload,” replied Marcus.

They unloaded the bodies and prepared the Blood Pyre. Rodrigo was an expert at this, positioning the bodies amongst the wood so that they burnt almost to dust. Their feet crunched under the ground laden with the remains of teeth and crusty bone.

Marcus doused the Pyre in oil and threw a match onto the human bonfire.

“Gods speed,” he said.

Rodrigo liked to watch the fire but Marcus ignored the growing orange flames and went into the shed, tidying up, replacing the tools in their correct place. Marcus took out the hair of the Citizen he had kept hidden on him. The black strands of hair were thick and strong. He put the hair into a pan and slipped it into the sunlight streaming through the window. It flared and turned to dust. Marcus looked at the dust and took the

pan back into the shade. He took out a knife and cut the palm of his hand. He dripped the blood onto the pan and watched as the dust combined with the blood and reformed the hair. However, something unexpected happened. Not only did the hair reform but skin had begun to reappear around the hair. The face of a Citizen began to appear. The eyelids were about to open.

“By the Gods!” Marcus quickly smashed the window with the pan and threw the reforming citizen out into the daylight.

The sunlight touched the reformed face and it burned away to dust as the eyes were about to open.

Outside the Blood Pyre was burning to an orange flame. The sickening smell was that of a barbecue. Body fat was sizzling and disintegrating.

“What was that noise?” asked Rodrigo, appearing in the doorway.

“Fire that could have gone out of control,” said Marcus darkly. “I put it out.” They prepared to leave.

There were two guards permanently posted outside Gaius Flavius’ offices. He was the administrator of the Versailles compound and a nobleman linked directly by Blood to the God Tartaros, one of the Progenoi living in one of the three Coombe palaces beneath Mora.

“I want to speak to Gaius,” Marcus said.

The two guards laughed like Marcus had made a joke.

One guard looked at the other. “He wants to speak to Gaius.” They laughed louder.

“It is my right under the Treaty of Mora.”

“Of course,” smiled the taller guard mockingly. “I shall see if he is available.”

Marcus waited and the other guard fixed his eyes on him, lifting his lips to show his teeth. Marcus ignored the guard. He knew there were many Citizens who wanted his death after what he had done.

“You may enter,” said the guard who had gone into the offices and just returned. Marcus walked into the building within the building. There was an immediate sense of calm once he walked inside. The floor was made of polished marble and was spotless. Images of the Gods were carved into the walls and floors. Marcus walked across the inner courtyard, past the marble columns, to a set of double doors which were left open. Gaius worked in here. There was a courtyard and a few citizens using electronic devices which they quickly hid from view now that a Pleb had entered their inner sanctum. Many raised their lips to show their teeth hostilely and Marcus gave them a wide berth.

“Take your shoes off before you enter Marcus,” said a stern voice. “I have just had the floor cleaned.” Marcus did so.

Gaius was sitting at his desk and he gestured with his finger.

“There and kneel.”

Marcus did so, not looking at Gaius, staring at the image of Kerberos on the ground.

“I am very busy person, what is it?”

“It is my mother, my Lord.”

Gaius looked over his reports disinterestedly.

“She is ill,” continued Marcus.

Gaius shook his head. "You bothered me with this?" He frowned and then raised a curious eyebrow. "How did you find this out?"

"One of the Blood told me," lied Marcus.

"Did one now?"

"Yes, my Lord. I ask your permission to visit her."

"Do you now?"

"Yes, my Lord."

Gaius went quiet. "You know why you were sent here Marcus. You committed a crime. You must serve your sentence. There are many who thought you should have been Blood. I count myself among those."

"But it is my right, my Lord under the Treaty of..."

Before Marcus could finish, he felt himself thrust against the back wall. Gaius was upon him, his mouth open and gaping, his foul smelling mouth blackened from old blood, almost hissing in Marcus' face.

"Rights!" Marcus was tossed to the other side of the room. "By the Gods I do not know what Mora has come to when a Pleb talks to me of rights!" He straightened his gowns. He walked over to the open double doors and closed them slowly. Outside, there was quiet curiosity and whispering.

Marcus coughed up blood.

"I am not a criminal my Lord. I was found not guilty by the courts."

"You assaulted a citizen," insisted Gaius.

"A Citizen who was breaking the law. What I did was lawful."

"If it was so lawful, why do you think they placed you here, demoted and disgraced?"

"It is a test."

"Of what, your character?"

"No my Lord, not a test of me, a test of you."

Gaius was infuriated. "How dare you speak to me like this!" He walked over to Marcus and pushed his face against the floor. "Turn your face away from me, you dog!"

"I know you are the cousin of Quintus. It's no coincidence that they placed me in your care. Your cousin broke the Law and they placed you with me, to demonstrate that your family still respect the Law. No Citizen is above the Law," quoted Marcus.

Gaius pushed Marcus's face into the cold floor.

"You think you're so smart Marcus with your knowledge of the Law. If you were so smart, you wouldn't be here. You'd still be the Praetorian's Chief Investigator maybe even a Citizen dining with the Virgins."

"I will be a Citizen one day Gaius and I will remember this."

Gaius laughed, taking his foot off Marcus' face. "Then you are a bigger fool that I thought. You will never become a Citizen after what you have done. I look forward to the day when it is your time to walk with the other Blood. I'll be there waiting for you. Now get out!"

Marcus left Gaius' office. His face was bruised and battered. He walked past the guards who laughed at Marcus, kicking him down the steps.

"See you again soon," they mocked him.

He returned to his quarters, limping a little.

“What happened to you?” asked Rodrigo.

“I had a disagreement,” was all Marcus could say. He felt a rage growing within him and threw off his clothes. He walked naked down to the showers and scrubbed his body. He let the water run into his mouth and spat out the blood. All he had on him was a simple leather necklace with a small wooden charm attached to it. The wooden charm was a figure of a small rabbit. Marcus felt humiliated and degraded. His fall from grace was complete now. He walked into the drying room and pounded his fists off the wall until they bled, thinking about his dying mother. He clenched his fist around the charm and placed his forehead against the wall. He closed his eyes, fighting back his sense of helplessness.